

T O M L O N G

**A SMALL
STATE'S
GUIDE TO
INFLUENCE
IN WORLD
POLITICS**

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1

Introduction

I teach graduate seminars on rising powers in International Relations (IR). In the first class of the year, I ask students which countries they consider “rising powers.” China, India, and Brazil are always the most mentioned. But almost every year, a couple students will propose Singapore as a member of the rising powers category. That Singapore—a city-state with a population of 5.6 million—has placed itself, in the minds of some, in a category more commonly associated with the giant BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is suggestive of its success transcending the role of a “small state.” Certainly, counting Singapore as a rising power is a minority position. But the view that it is dynamic and influential is widespread.¹

Singapore is perhaps an extreme case, but it is hardly the only “small state” that surpasses the limited expectations typically associated with the category. Students sometimes mention Qatar (population 2.8 million) because of its long reach in communications, culture, travel, and finance.² Norway, Finland, and Sweden are treated as international paragons for their social democracy, high living standards, and influence in matters of peace and conflict with minimal attention to their size.³ Switzerland has stayed at the margins of destructive conflicts on its doorstep and emerged as a wealthy global hub. In 2020, Uruguay was feted for its relative success controlling the COVID-19 pandemic despite the catastrophe next door in Brazil.⁴ After decades as a sort of U.S. protectorate, Panama has managed, expanded, and benefited from one of the world’s most important waterways.⁵ Cuba has been a global icon (or villain) since 1959, projecting power through its example, its military, and its medical and sports programs.⁶ A frequent development success story, Botswana uses its successes to recast relations with international donors.⁷ Though criticized for its authoritarian slide, for decades, Rwanda shaped international narratives about its past

¹ One analyst aptly writes of Singapore’s “virtual enlargement.” Chong, “Small State Soft Power Strategies.”

² Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*.

³ Ingebritsen, *Scandinavia in World Politics*; Pedersen, “Bandwagon for Status.”

⁴ Taylor, “Uruguay Is Winning against Covid-19. This Is How.”

⁵ Long, “Putting the Canal on the Map”; Conniff and Bigler, *Modern Panama*.

⁶ Brenner and Eisner, *Cuba Libre: A 500-Year Quest for Independence*.

⁷ Maipose, “Botswana: The African Success Story.”

to pursue its own goals, deflect scrutiny, and maintain access to donors and investment.⁸

This book argues that small states can achieve important international goals and exercise influence, but not without overcoming significant constraints. Recognizing such challenges is nothing new, but here we argue that the pattern of opportunities and limitations that small states face does not result from an immutable, distant, and unforgiving international system. Nor can such constraints be understood solely as the result of small states' limited domestic capabilities. Instead, we must understand small states in the context of their relationships with other states, especially their most salient, asymmetrical relationships. These ties exercise the greatest effects on small states' international identities, the definition of their interests, and the options available in pursuit of their goals. The book provides a framework that scholars can use to analyze the international relations of small states. Likewise, policymakers can use this book's approach to assess their state's challenges and identify situations most amenable to change. Small-state policymakers must then match their unique resources with the strategies best suited to achieve influence in asymmetrical relationships.

By all but the narrowest definitions, most of the world's states are small states. Driven by decolonization, imperial dissolution, and secession, the number of small states has increased steadily since World War II. Once created, they are rarely eliminated. Small states constitute majorities in most global and regional international organizations. Dozens have gotten rich in the globalized economy. Conversely, being big is no guarantee of success. Economically, many of the great have been humbled, as a glance at erstwhile members of the 2000s rising power club attests.⁹ Nor does heft ensure capability or political competence, as the failures of several large states in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic indicates. Through the end of 2020, there were indications that small states outperformed their larger peers in containing the virus—though wealth offered undeniable advantages in medical capacity, vaccine procurement, and economic recovery.¹⁰

Despite their often-impressive performance, small states remain overlooked in international affairs, almost by definition. Likewise, they occupy a second-tier status in the study of IR. When small states are addressed, they are often seen through the lens of great-power geopolitics: they become victims, proxies, or pawns. On their own, they appear insignificant. Do small states matter for international relations? This book answers, robustly, in the affirmative. But small states' importance is not well captured by their numbers or their collective UN General Assembly voting weight. More profoundly, small states matter because

⁸ Swedlund, "Narratives and Negotiations in Foreign Aid."

⁹ Zarakol, "Rise of the Rest."

¹⁰ Pedi and Wivel, "Small State Diplomacy after the Corona Crisis"; Briguglio and Azzopardi-Muscat, "Small States and COVID-19."

they constitute, shape, and influence myriad relationships with other states, both large and small. IR's disciplinary fixation on "the" international system, and its related bias toward studying great powers, has distorted our field's ability to appreciate the situations of small states. Within the study of small states, one of the oldest questions has been whether polarity—the number of great powers in the international system—affects small states' prospects.¹¹ Instead, our relational perspective suggests that whether the international system is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar at a global level matters less to a small state than the nature of its relationships with a handful of much larger states. If a small state is tightly bound to a much larger one—say, Moldova to Russia in the early 1990s—it is the nature of that asymmetrical relationship that matters, and not whether the large state remains a "pole" in the international system. In short, the satellite view of world politics makes the great powers visible but hides the multitude of states. It does not get us very far in terms of understanding small states' roles in international affairs. This satellite view even obscures most of the *great powers'* international relationships! Yes, great powers care about their relationships with other large states. But they also spend inordinate amounts of time concerned about much smaller locales. Without considering small states, we miss most of the "stuff" that makes up international relations. This gap limits the utility of IR to policymakers and students in much of the world.

In response, many studies of small states have taken a more microscopic approach. They stress the particularities of individual small states, attentive to the domestic and foreign policy characteristics of the world's bantamweights. These studies show how the diversity of small states—and other polities that may not be universally considered states—contributes to the texture of international politics.¹² That is no small thing: some of the most effective challenges to the exaggerated centrality of "anarchy" in IR emerged from closer looks at small states.¹³ Individual studies often suggest the difficulties of comparing or drawing lessons across the ambiguous category of "small state." However, studying small states' domestic characteristics and foreign policy concerns in isolation can create an inverse set of blind spots to the satellite view. A microscopic focus on individual small states allows us to perceive their marvels, but proximity blocks out shared issues and constraints.

¹¹ Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*; Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas"; Handel, *Weak States in the International System*; Maass, *Small States in World Politics*; Jesse and Dreyer, *Small States in the International System*, 21–25. For an early contrary perspective, Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States."

¹² There is an extensive literature of this nature, often published in very diverse outlets. But one may get a sense of it in some more prominent volumes that collect such single-country studies: Archer, Bailes, and Wivel, *Small States and International Security*; Hey, *Small States in World Politics*; Goetschel, *Small States inside and outside the European Union*.

¹³ Hobson and Sharman, "The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics."

Instead, this book adopts a relational approach to small states. That focus brings the analysis closer to the concerns of small states' diplomats, who engage less in generalizable grand strategies and more in discrete issues and interactions. We define, theorize, and investigate small states in the context of their salient asymmetrical relationships. In the most prosaic terms, these are the relationships between a small state and a great power. The patterns and dynamics of asymmetry—a significant disparity in material capabilities—shape the international environment that small states face. But not all asymmetrical relationships carry equal weight. For each small state, the importance of a few relationships rises above the rest for reasons of size, proximity, and interdependence. Historical and cultural ties also contribute to salience. These salient asymmetrical relationships shape a small state's international outlook. The very category of the “small state” needs to be understood as relative and relational. Small states are “small” only when juxtaposed to much larger states. Just as asymmetrical relationships constitute small states as “small,” they constitute great powers as “great.”

States' positions in networks of international relationships affect their identities and interests. Deriving identities and goals from domestic politics alone is inadequate. Relational position affects how states perceive their own goals, as well as the opportunities and constraints they face. From a satellite view, the broad network of relationships is similar in appearance to the “international system.” While the “system” constitutes the context for all states' actions, its relational underpinnings matter.¹⁴ A few relationships within the system are salient for given actors, while most blur into the background. A small state's ability to achieve influence—to affect the behavior of other actors to achieve its goals—is conditioned by the dynamics of its salient asymmetrical relationships, not an immutable structure.

For that reason, the idea of asymmetry runs throughout this book. Asymmetry imposes constraints, but the distribution of material resources does not translate neatly into political outcomes in conflict, economic bargaining, international organizations, or the management of transnational challenges.¹⁵ Despite macro-level asymmetries of population, gross domestic product (GDP), or military budgets, small states can develop their own material, social, and ideational resources to pursue their goals. Employing multiple models of might, which we describe as particular-intrinsic, derivative, and collective power, small states retain varied abilities to respond to the opportunities and constraints produced by relational conditions, and to shape those conditions over time.¹⁶

¹⁴ Here, our treatment of relationships and the “systemic” level follows Jackson and Nexon, “Reclaiming the Social”; Nexon, “Relationalism and New Systems Theory.”

¹⁵ Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships*; Long, *Latin America Confronts the United States*.

¹⁶ Long, “Small States, Great Power?”

Despite material disadvantages in their salient asymmetrical relationships, many small states have achieved security and economic success. But have they achieved influence? Or does their wellbeing remain dependent on the whims of great powers? Can small states define and pursue their own goals successfully, even when great powers are involved (and perhaps opposed)? To achieve influence in bilateral relationships and beyond, small states must diagnose relational conditions and adapt their strategies. One effect of asymmetry is that a small state's ability to achieve influence will depend heavily on political conditions within large states and on the nature of relationships with those large states. When seeking a particular goal vis-à-vis a great power, a small state should assess the combination of three conditions. First, what is the degree of *divergence* between the small state's preferences and the great power's status quo policy? Second, how *salient* is that issue in the relationship and to the policymakers in the great power? Third, to what extent do the great power's policymakers have *cohesive preferences* about the issue? By systematizing the interaction of these three questions, we present a typological theory in Chapter 3 and highlight relevant strategies for each type of case in Chapter 4.

Who are you calling small?

Before going further, we should clarify the object of our study: the small state. While polities of different sizes have existed throughout history, the idea of the "small state" dates back about two centuries in European diplomatic practice. The emergence of the idea was linked to the practice of great-power diplomacy among the Concert of Europe. States who were excluded from the Concert of Europe's diplomatic deliberations were considered small.¹⁷ Outside of Europe, and in a context where state forms were (re)created through colonization and decolonization, the historical origins of the idea of the "small state" are complex and varied. In Asia, small states are artificial and relatively recent constructions, absent from the historical record before European colonization, Alan Chong argues.¹⁸ With reference to the Middle East, Máté Szalai makes reference to "small regimes" that are "dressed as 'states.'"¹⁹ Even in Europe, one has to accept considerable stretching to designate "small states" through the centuries. Long-run studies often include polities whose statehood would be dubious under today's conceptions.²⁰ If the idea of the European small state coalesced in the

¹⁷ Neumann and Gstöhl, "Lilliputians in Gulliver's World?"

¹⁸ Chong, "Small State Security in Asia?"

¹⁹ Szalai, "Small Regimes in the Middle East," 8.

²⁰ Maass, *Small States in World Politics*. For a discussion of the variety of political forms and their relationships, see Sharman, *Empires of the Weak*.

great-power summit of 1815, it was formalized and globalized over the next century. It remained linked to exclusion from the halls of power. Within Europe, smallness in population and territory was often linked to omission from key diplomatic councils.²¹ Outside of Europe, however, exclusion was justified with reference to civilizational and racial hierarchies instead of by size.²² These practices left both large and small non-European states at the margins—even when their independence and “state-ness” was not in doubt.²³

The small state is no longer defined by exclusion from international bodies. Instead of small states being defined by their exclusion, *inclusion* in these international organizations is an important marker in being accepted as a *state*, large or small. In that context, some states embrace the identity of smallness as a shared marker in international society.²⁴ But size—often related to GDP rather than population—remains a criterion for invitations to international affairs. Great-power clubs, like the G7 and G20, exist and still function as a sort of political and economic concert. Small groupings of large states—whether the “G2” of China and the United States, the UN Security Council’s (UNSC) Permanent Five (P5), or “the Quad” of the United States, the European Union, Japan, and Canada—seek an oligopolistic control of the international agenda. Small states have gained greater access to global debates than they had in Vienna in 1815 or in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, though their formal influence in international councils varies. Some regional and global organizations grant even the smallest states formal equal weight under one-state, one-vote rules or consensus-based decision-making. Elsewhere, small states have membership but infinitesimal voting power; such is the case in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This bifurcation is encapsulated at the core of the international system: the United Nations reserves special rights and duties to the P5 while giving small states equal rights only in the less powerful General Assembly.

Small states in history

As this picture suggests, defining who counts as a small state is not a simple matter, and there is no universal approach. The question of definition remains an area of contention among small-state scholars. In diplomatic practice too,

²¹ Neumann and Gstöhl, “Lilliputians in Gulliver’s World?”; Maass, *Small States in World Politics*.

²² Keene, “The Standard of ‘Civilisation,’ the Expansion Thesis and the 19th-Century International Social Space.”

²³ Schulz, “Civilisation, Barbarism and the Making of Latin America’s Place in 19th-Century International Society.”

²⁴ Browning, “Small, Smart and Salient?”; Corbett, Xu, and Weller, “Norm Entrepreneurship and Diffusion ‘from below’ in International Organisations.”

multiple definitions abound.²⁵ Before considering modern definitional debates, we consider small states in historical perspective. This helps set the chronological scope for the book's theory and cases. Historical examinations of small states run into several conceptual problems and empirical challenges. First, small polities in earlier eras did not necessarily constitute *states* as we typically conceive them—even in contexts where IR theory long suggested that the units of the international system were fundamentally alike. At the extreme, small states' plight is often described with reference to ancient Greece. Thucydides (c. 400 BCE) depicted how the inhabitants of the small island of Melos insisted on their independence against the mighty Athenians, only to be crushed, killed, and forced into slavery.²⁶ This became one of IR's favorite morality plays. The lesson? The vulnerability of small states is an eternal element of world politics. But how comparable was Melos to the small states of today?

Much more recently, IR scholar Matthias Maass built a dataset to examine rates of small-state survival from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia—an oft-used marker for the European sovereign state system—until 2016.²⁷ Explicitly adopting a systemic level of analysis, Maass argues that small states' survival was overwhelmingly affected by several characteristics of international society, and especially by the nature of relations among great powers. Waves of small-state “extinction” accompanied the Napoleonic Wars and German and Italian unifications. Great-power cooperation in the Concert of Europe preserved more small states, but at the price of their autonomy. Remnants of that concert coordinated the dramatic expansion of colonialism in the late nineteenth century, blocking the creation of non-European small states. It was only the eventual great-power embrace of collective security and the U.S.-led expansion of norms against territorial conquest and in favor of self-determination (albeit selectively) that reversed the decline. Then, decolonization boosted the number of small states.²⁸

While fascinating, this satellite view gives a skewed picture in several respects. Despite Maass's attempts to delimit his category to units possessing a sufficient degree of “stateness” and autonomy, the roughly 400 European units included at the beginning of the study are a poor fit for the assumption that polities in the international system are functionally “like units.” This much has been made clear in IR's deconstruction of the “Westphalian myth” that sovereignty and an anarchic international states system emerged, reasonably complete, in 1648.²⁹

²⁵ For recent extensive review of these definition debates, see Maass, “The Elusive Definition of the Small State”; Archer, Bailes, and Wivel, *Small States and International Security*, chap. 1.

²⁶ Baldacchino, “Thucydides or Kissinger?”; Hanson, *The Landmark Thucydides*.

²⁷ Maass, *Small States in World Politics*.

²⁸ Maass, *Small States in World Politics*. On great powers and the emergence of new states, see Coggins, *Power Politics and State Formation in the Twentieth Century*.

²⁹ Osiander, “Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth”; Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*.

The units included during these early centuries exhibited great variations in internal structure and external relations. The very notion of states as rulers over particular territories, for example, developed later.³⁰ The ideal of statehood as linked to a particular territory “originated in the actions of European polities and rulers outside of Europe rather than within it,” especially in the conquest of the Americas. The diffusion and implementation of the state, large or small, was gradual and uneven.³¹ Even “throughout the nineteenth century sovereign equality was available only to a minority.”³² Despite medieval European roots, the state as IR knows it today is part and parcel of modernity. Before that, there was a world of disparate polities.³³

That diversity existed within Europe, with higher levels of interaction and elements of shared culture and religion. Variation in political forms was even greater elsewhere in the world, but these accounts render those polities invisible. This signals a second problem. Most accounts of small states in history are largely populated by European states. The Americas make a gradual entry, while the rest of the world is largely absent until after World War II. The historical definition of “small states” as those excluded from European great powers’ discussions means that the entirety of the “non-West” would have been “small” from the perspective of European diplomacy.³⁴ It implicitly accepts a jaundiced historical perspective as empirical fact. Doing so misses the variety of political forms and the complexities of relations among them. Recent studies of colonialism have illustrated how often it was built on fragmentary and negotiated relations with ensconced political leaders. It was shaped by private and parastatal actors, not just states. At the same time, state-like polities existed before and during European colonialism, but these are overlooked by standard Eurocentric accounts.³⁵ These polities had complex relations to territory and imperial and other authorities—but so did many European and American polities into the nineteenth century.³⁶ When tracing the survival, influence, and status of small states across history, one can easily fall into anachronistic treatments of the “small state” by overstating the “stateness” of European polities while overlooking cohesive political

³⁰ Branch, *The Cartographic State*.

³¹ Branch, “‘Colonial Reflection’ and Territoriality.”

³² Buzan, “Universal Sovereignty,” 236.

³³ Onuf, *The Republican Legacy in International Thought*; Harding, “The Origins of the Concept of the State.”

³⁴ Neumann et al., *Small States in International Relations*.

³⁵ Sharman, *Empires of the Weak*; Dunne and Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society*; Schulz, “Territorial Sovereignty and the End of Inter-Cultural Diplomacy along the ‘Southern Frontier.’”

³⁶ In a more nuanced restatement of this process, Buzan argues that modern sovereignty was “imposed on the rest of the planet” by Europe during the nineteenth century (236). However, this picture looked much different in Latin America, for example, where debates about popular sovereignty, republicanism, and democracy raged during this period. Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*; Sabato, *Republics of the New World*.

organization elsewhere. And if the unit of analysis, the small state, is hardly comparable, then the lessons drawn about how great powers and the international system threaten small states may be the wrong ones.³⁷

Ultimately, a more moderate historical frame of reference is better suited to the purposes of understanding small states' international positions and possibilities for influence. The contours of today's system as they concern small states did not really emerge until after World War II. Then, the status of international legal sovereignty, conveyed through recognition by the community of states, began to offer many of the benefits it conveys today.³⁸ Those include membership in an expanding roster of international organizations, a high degree of existential security through norms against territorial conquest, the erosion of formal empires, access to international development finance, readier participation in international commerce, participation in cooperative security alliances, and more.

We now turn to definitional debates about modern small states. Instead of recapitulating these scholarly disagreements, we summarize three different approaches to the question of "who are you calling small?" The first emphasizes material indicators of size, especially territory, population, and GDP. The second emphasizes perceptions, ideas, and social construction. The third is relational and relative, allowing that a state might be small in one context but not in another. It is from this final approach that this book departs.

Material views

Early attempts to formalize the definition and construct a category of small states often drew on great-power-centric IR theory—but in reverse. If great powers were defined by the preponderance of their populations, territories, militaries, and economies, then small states were defined by the absence of those qualities. Material approaches usually suggest a quantifiable indicator for small states—such as a maximum population or economic size.

Simple, population-based approaches retain sway in international organizations today. The World Bank's Small States Forum references an upper-bound population of 1.5 million, though its fifty members include somewhat larger states like Jamaica (population 2.9 million). This approach closely follows the Commonwealth's small-state definition, which uses a limit of 1.5 million, but also includes "countries with a bigger population but which share many of the

³⁷ Many of these lessons that Maass draws bear similarities to those of the realism-inflected classics on small states. See, especially, Handel, *Weak States in the International System*; Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*.

³⁸ Archer, Bailes, and Wivel, *Small States and International Security*, chap. 1; Thorhallsson, *Small States and Shelter Theory*, 46–47.

same characteristics.”³⁹ The UN Forum on Small States includes more than 100 states, with populations ranging from tens of thousands to roughly ten million. Population-based definitions and categorizations are common in studies too. David Vital offered the most influential early numerical definition of small states: a population-based limit of 10 million residents for developed states and 20 million for developing states.⁴⁰

These definitions have two lasting attractions, but also two serious limitations.⁴¹ The first attraction is that the focus on material capabilities lends itself to quantification. Quantification, in turn, allows for the creation of clear-cut categories (e.g., a small state has a population of less than ten million people). With a bit greater complexity, one can include and blend different elements of material power by combining quantitative indicators into an index (such as IR's longstanding Composite Index of National Capabilities [CINC]).⁴² The second attraction, related to the first, is that the focus on material capabilities appears to offer a more “objective” approach to defining small states.

But a focus on material criteria suffers from drawbacks. Clear-cut indicators allow for categorization, but some arbitrary distinctions are unavoidable. Moving from ten million to ten million plus one has no meaningful effect, but it would lead to a category shift. “The cut-off point between big and small states is rarely self-evident, and, accordingly, there is no consensus on what constitutes a small state in term of power possession . . . leading to confusion over how to recognize a small state when we see one.”⁴³ Of course, one may be more nuanced and think of size as a continuum while still adopting a material and quantifiable approach. Treating size as a continuous variable, with attention to various elements of power, is surely a stronger quantitative approach than neat categorization—though it avoids a clear answer to the question of “who is a small state?”

A second concern is that material indicators tend to have a static quality; if the goal is to use them for time-series analysis, they need to be contextualized for the growth in world population and economy, the number of states, etc. That is a surmountable problem, but the bigger challenge is to account for how shifts in the international environment and more specific contexts change the salience of certain types of capabilities—for example, the growing importance of possessing a sophisticated and diversified economy as compared to controlling a large territory and/or population.

³⁹ The Commonwealth, “Small States,” n.d., accessed November 19, 2020, <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-work/small-states>.

⁴⁰ Vital, *The Inequality of States*.

⁴¹ These are discussed at length in Archer, Bailes, and Wivel, *Small States and International Security*, 5–10.

⁴² The CINC is part of the Correlates of War project, and the underlying data are available here: <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/national-material-capabilities>.

⁴³ Archer, Bailes, and Wivel, *Small States and International Security*, 8.

A different, materially focused approach departs from the structural realist emphasis on the distribution of capabilities. According to this view, most associated with Kenneth Waltz, the nature of the international system is determined by the distribution of capabilities across states.⁴⁴ While Waltz was concerned with large states, other scholars noted that small states' position in the international system can also be understood through that distribution, again, as the inverse of the great powers. Whereas the influence of great powers is "system-determining" in Keohane's words, small states are "system ineffectual."⁴⁵ This systemic position also creates different interests. Great powers have wide-ranging or even global concerns; their scope of action is likewise geographically and thematically extensive. Conversely, small states are characterized by a focus on local and subsystemic issues, with little capacity for action beyond their borders or immediate neighbors.

However, this interpretation of small states' interests is anachronistic, to the extent it ever applied generally. Many of small states' salient interests will be local in scope—but that is also the case for medium and large states. Witness India's fixation on Pakistan, or Russia's attention to its "near abroad." Small states' interests and actions can also be global in scope, and perhaps increasingly so. Climate change is an existential, global-level threat for some small island states, and they respond accordingly at the global level. Small states are deeply engaged in global finance, sometimes as tax havens, offshore banking centers, or hubs for money laundering. Small states may have large and transnational diaspora communities. Today, many small states cannot afford to have only local interests.

Ideational views

The limitations of material approaches to small states, as well as divergent theoretical concerns, have led scholars to emphasize ideas, perceptions, and social dynamics.⁴⁶ Diverse ideational approaches to definition emphasize how states perceive their own size and socially construct "smallness." Others have noted the importance of self-perception, defining small states as those whose leaders understand themselves as small. Rothstein linked smallness to leaders' perceptions that their own state's security depended on the assistance of others.⁴⁷ Goetschel emphasized "the self-perception of the state in respect to its international environment."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

⁴⁵ Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas."

⁴⁶ Browning, "Small, Smart and Salient?"; Baldacchino and Wivel, "Small States: Concepts and Theories."

⁴⁷ Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*.

⁴⁸ Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe," 28.

Following this logic, some scholars allow states to define themselves as small (or not) by using the membership of the UN Forum on Small States. Because states opt into the forum, it offers a simple indicator of whether states self-identify as small. Compared to a history in which the term “small state” or “small power” was often a derogatory classification,⁴⁹ the trend to positively embrace smallness is intriguing.⁵⁰ Since its establishment by Singapore in 1992, the UN Forum on Small States has grown to include 108 states.⁵¹ Under its own Small States Forum, the World Bank convenes some fifty small states to discuss economic and development challenges. In global climate change negotiations, the caucus of self-denominated small island developing states (SIDSs) links members' interests to smallness and environmental vulnerability. Even at the great-power-driven UNSC, the self-identified “Small Five” have called for reform.⁵² Such groupings have often tried to contrast “small size” with “big ideas.” In doing so, they embrace an international identity that is innately at odds with material power- and size-centric approaches to international hierarchies and pecking orders.

However, as we discuss later, small states' leaders may identify as small in some international environments (e.g., a global forum) but not in others (e.g., a subregional meeting). Another approach goes beyond those mentioned earlier and looks at smallness as a positive element of state identity connected to discursive practices or even performative strategy.⁵³ Rather than seeing smallness as the perception of limitations, Browning argues that “states may in fact ‘choose’ to define themselves as small precisely as a strategy of gaining more influence over their environment.”⁵⁴ These small states seek to be perceived as “small, smart, and salient.” In the case of Finland, the identity of smallness has been articulated as allowing certain possibilities for action that diverge from an assumed absence of power.⁵⁵ As a definitional approach, this has limited generalizability, but it suggests an important turn in a different respect. Connecting state identities and discourses with state size opens an analysis of how smallness can constitute an ideational base for state action.

⁴⁹ Maass makes the same point about the German term “Kleinstaaterei,” often used to question small states right to exist in the nineteenth century. Maass, *Small States in World Politics*, 72, 123.

⁵⁰ Wohlforth et al., “Moral Authority and Status in International Relations”; Corbett, Xu, and Weller, “Norm Entrepreneurship and Diffusion ‘from below’ in International Organisations.”

⁵¹ Chew, “A History of the Forum of Small States”; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, “Small states,” <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/SINGAPORES-FOREIGN-POLICY/International-Issues/Small-States>.

⁵² The Small Five include Costa Rica, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Singapore, and Switzerland.

⁵³ Browning, “Small, Smart and Salient?”; de Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*; Corbett, Xu, and Weller, “Norm Entrepreneurship and Diffusion ‘from below’ in International Organisations.”

⁵⁴ Browning, “Small, Smart and Salient?” 673.

⁵⁵ Browning, “Small, Smart and Salient?”

Role theory offers another approach that builds on constructivist insights to connect state identity with international position. Scholars in this tradition connect being a “small state” with a specific international role that emerges from the conjunction of domestic factors, like identity and leadership perceptions, and external considerations generated by interactions with other states. Proponents argue that role conceptions better explain the diversity of small states’ foreign policies.⁵⁶ When domestic factors received greater emphasis than international constraints, small states may resist great powers’ expectations for compliance.⁵⁷ Guimarães sees the small-state role as constrained by hegemonic discourses, though small states may respond creatively and attempt to reject or subvert such imposed roles.⁵⁸ Conceptualizing the “small state” as a role is one way of trying to escape the limitations of purely material categories and systemic determinism, on the one hand, and the difficulties of comparing or accumulating insights from narrative and self-identification, on the other.

Relational views

This book adopts a different approach, though it recognizes the importance of material capabilities, perceptions, and positionality. When we consider who is a small state—and to conceptualize what a small state *is*—we need to think relationally. Relational approaches to conceptualizing the small state permit different theoretical perspectives and research aims. For example, in a largely realist account, Jesse and Dryer develop a relational treatment of state size based on regional hierarchies; those hierarchies are defined by state leaders’ perceptions of capabilities. Following this approach, they create a five-part typology: superpowers, great powers, middle powers, small states, and microstates. A small state is “always weak at the global and regional levels, but strong at the sub-regional level.”⁵⁹

Asymmetrical relationships constitute small states, and the perceptions and dynamics of asymmetry shape the nature of a small state’s international relations. Along these lines, we build on Archer et al., who “define a small state as the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship,” while advocating a “qualitative and relational” approach. This is an important step, though they did not develop theoretically the implications of this reconceptualization.⁶⁰ More recently,

⁵⁶ Gigueux, “Explaining the Diversity of Small States’ Foreign Policies through Role Theory.”

⁵⁷ Simon, “When David Fights Goliath.”

⁵⁸ Guimarães, *A Theory of Master Role Transition*.

⁵⁹ Jesse and Dreyer, *Small States in the International System*, 10.

⁶⁰ Archer, Bailes, and Wivel, *Small States and International Security*, 9. The implications of that definition were not always clear in the ensuing case study chapters, written by a variety of contributors.

Baldacchino and Wivel have expanded on this relational approach, arguing that for small states, “the consequences of limited capacity are exacerbated by power asymmetry, leaving small states to struggle with being price and policy takers overall.”⁶¹ We connect their relational and contextual emphasis with greater theoretical engagement with the dynamics of asymmetry.⁶²

There is a legacy for such relational approaches in the study of small states, though deeper theorization of asymmetry is a more recent development. Asymmetry theory aligns with earlier arguments by Robert Rothstein and Maurice East that small states' perspectives on world politics differed in fundamental respects from those of great powers.⁶³ While this point of difference has been validated by much ensuing scholarship on small states, it assumes a mutually exclusive categorization of great and small. As elaborated by Brantly Womack, asymmetry theory does not turn on defining any given state as large or small; instead, its starting point is to treat size as a continuum of relations among states. Womack argues that material capabilities matter but must be understood within a social and relational context. Differences in material capabilities shape how small and large states perceive one another. Because of these differences, small and large states understand their relationships with one another in fundamentally different ways. Where states' relationships are characterized by unmistakable disparities in material capabilities, patterns of asymmetry will emerge. Asymmetry creates disparate perceptions, interests, and possibilities for actions, Womack argues. It is the *relational position* of the relatively weaker state that distinguishes it from the stronger state; this suggests something beyond Rothstein's point that small states are not simply “great powers writ small.” When one considers positionality in this way, it makes sense that New Zealand, for example, may be a small state on the global stage while seeming quite large to its Pacific Island neighbors.⁶⁴

Initially, it may seem that such a contextual and relational approach is no more amenable to comparison and cumulation than one based in self-identification. In a sense, that is correct—our approach does not sort states into fixed categories, as the example of New Zealand suggests. However, it does allow for the comparison of *relationships* and of how small states respond to similar combinations of relational positions and conditions. Explaining and illustrating how this works will be the major task of this book.

⁶¹ Baldacchino and Wivel, “Small States: Concepts and Theories,” 7.

⁶² Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships*; Musgrave, “Asymmetry, Hierarchy, and the Ecclesiastes Trap”; Long, *Latin America Confronts the United States*; Oh, “Power Asymmetry and Threat Points.”

⁶³ Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships*; Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*; East, “Size and Foreign Policy Behavior.”

⁶⁴ Brady, *Small States and the Changing Global Order: New Zealand Faces the Future*.

Organization and conclusions

The following chapters will build on asymmetrical and relational theories of IR to explore the situation of small states in international politics, propose a theory that integrates the constraints and possibilities small states face, describe possible strategies that respond to those conditions, and assess that theory in the light of some twenty short case studies.

Chapter 2 places small states within the broadest international context. Instead of characterizing the international system by the number of great powers and the ties among them, we explain world politics as a composite of myriad relationships. For any given small state, a handful of those relationships will be especially salient; usually, the most salient relationships will be asymmetrical. Great-power politics, institutionalization, economic governance, and the normative environment also shape the international background in which these relationships develop, from the perspectives of small states. Chapter 3 focuses on how small states' positions in international relationships impose certain constraints, while also creating opportunities to achieve goals. Small states are not all the same, of course, nor are they defined only by their positionalities. For that reason, we discuss the internal conditions and our assumptions about small states' domestic characteristics as they relate to the international sphere. Upon that foundation, we develop our typological theory about how small states' relationships affect their abilities to pursue goals. This framework should help policymakers diagnose their own states' relationships and opportunities. In the final theoretical chapter, Chapter 4, we build on asymmetry theory and our typological theory to detail certain foreign policy strategies for the pursuit of international goals by small states. These strategies emerge from sources of power that, while not exclusive to small states, are of greater relative importance to the weaker party in asymmetrical relationships. Again, our hope is that this provides tools for policymakers to match their diagnosis with a response.

Asymmetry stands at the core of our analysis and at the heart of our conceptualization of the small state. It also forms the core of our case studies in Chapters 5 and 6, which examine how small states in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe pursue their security and economic policy goals in the context of asymmetrical relationships. Both the number and organization of the case studies are somewhat unusual within IR, so it merits a word of explanation. Each case-study chapter is thematic. Chapter 5 explores issues of international security; Chapter 6, international political economy; and Chapter 7, international institutions, law, and norms. Within Chapters 5 and 6, there is a nested organization, with a pair of case studies from each of the four regions mentioned previously. Each pair includes one case study of a specific foreign policy issue where the small state was deemed to have achieved its goal and one where the small state largely failed

to achieve its goal. Each individual case in these two chapters situates the small state's foreign policy within salient asymmetrical relationships. In that sense, each case study addresses the ties between a small state and (at least one) major power. The nested organization allows for variation in issue areas, regions, countries (small and large), and outcomes, providing a broad base of evidence for the theory. The final case chapter, Chapter 7, loosens the more narrowly dyadic organization of evidence to address issues of a more diffuse scope: climate change, human rights, regional organizations, and global public health. These topics bring additional evidence to bear on our treatment of the global environment as emphasized in Chapter 2. They also provide greater scope for assessing how small states' relations with one another—not just with large states—matter. The concluding Chapter 8 draws out comparisons from across our cases, assesses the theory in light of this evidence, and suggests applications for research and policy.

This description of the book's organization should give some sense of the task ahead. It goes without saying, but no single author can be an expert in all small states, regions, or issues, so I have relied on the work and advice of dozens of scholars to construct my case studies and to inform my theory. My hope is that this tradeoff, exchanging country-level depth for cross-regional breadth, furthers the comparative study of small states and their asymmetrical relationships. Likewise, I hope my theoretical approach sheds light on small states' quests for influence in the interstices of asymmetrical relationships, and in doing so brings the study of small states into closer conversation with other debates in IR theory. After all, this is not a story of small states in isolation. It is the story of jousting with giants on the uneven playing field of international politics over matters as fundamental as security, wealth, and the nature of international society.

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